- Eating customs

Eat well, be healthy

Inculcating good dietary habits in kids

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UNSURPRISING fact: Malaysians are generally an unhealthy lot. And much of it is linked to our gastronomic intake, which leans heavily on fried and oily foodstuff.



The challenge to change age-old habits are that much harder when there is temptation in the form of great grub everywhere. With food delivery riders now making it even easier to have one's favourite meals, is it really any surprise that obesity is on the rise among Malaysians?

For many, the attempt to change may come too late with the onset with a variety of chronic and lifestyle diseases already affecting an individual. Such individuals will face an uphill battle to turn things around, especially bad eating habits that have been cultivated from young.

A recent study by the Health Ministry confirms a growing number of conditions afflicting Malaysians that are linked to diet. For young families, there is still a chance to inculcate good dietary practices in their offspring. These are some of the ways parents can help instil good eating habits.

Be a role model

The kids are not going to bite if they see their parents chomping on uhealthy snacks and leading a sedentary lifestyle. The first step would be for the parents to make a change in wanting a healthier diet. Insist on eating together and underline that the meal time is quality family time. Talk, catch-up and certainly discuss the merits of the meal that is being served.

Sacred rituals

Imposing a non-negotiable smartphone ban during meal times is also encouraged for there is nothing unhealthier than being distracted by a screen during meals.

Focus not just the food, but also the people at the table to create a positive family vibe. There is absolutely nothing positive to be gained from being glued to a phone during meals and this applies to parents too!

Kitchen confidential

One of the best ways to indulge in healthier food choices is by getting involved in the kitchen. As a rule of thumb, home-cooked meals are supposed to be healthier as you can control the ingredients as opposed to dining out where the food may be rich in MSG and saturated fats. Encouraging young kids to unearth their inner chefs will get them to explore a whole variety of healthy ingredients.

Having helped prepare or cook the meal, there is always less chance the children will complain. In fact, they may be more inclined to try something new or perceived to be less than tasty and flavourful simply because they had a hand in stirring the wok!

Prepare alternate versions

Ok, so cutting out unhealthy junk foods may be mission impossible. Parents can always suggest making alternate, healthier versions of hawker or fast food faves. Get the kids to load up on a homemade pizza with tons of healthy vegetables or stir-fry noodles that is packed with fresh ingredients instead of processed items.

Homemade desserts are a great way to form healthier eating habits by cutting down on sugar and artificial additives.

Nothing spells gourmand like a bowl of hand-churned ice-cream – chances are the kids will adore it because they can boast it is hand-churned.

Be patient and persistent

Sometime, it is easier said than done. Some kids will be stubborn and obstinate. But, never ever resort to punishment or forcing the child to eat as that would be counterproductive and it defeats the purpose. Find subtle ways to change the child's mind and let the meal take place in a relaxed environment. Slowly but surely, they will come round, especially when they run the risk of going hungry while everyone else is having a jolly good time tucking into the healthy fare.

Alternates to deep frying

Greasy, deep fried goodies are yummy. They just are. But, fact is they are not good for our well-being. Encourage kids to eat more soups and steamed foods that do not use oil or lard in its preparation. The internet is an unlimited resource on how to make flavoursome meals that do not involve a deep-fryer. Using a slow cooker is another method that promotes healthy eating as the ingredients retain flavour and aroma as well as all the nutrients.

Do not rush into forcing a completely new diet or menu on your offsping. This will certainly put them off even more. Instead, it is a gradual process to turn the dietary tide towards someting healthy and wholesome. But all good things begin with a single step and the above suggestions can make your dining table a happier, healthier place to be.